

Deadliest US transportation incident since 2009

Limo crash in upstate New York kills 20

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A limousine crash on October 6 in Schoharie, New York, killed 20 people, making it the deadliest transportation accident in the US since 2009, when Colgan Air Flight 3407 crashed in Buffalo, killing 50 people. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is investigating the crash, with initial reports indicating that a dangerous intersection contributed to the accident.

NTSB Chairman Robert Sumwalt told reporters Sunday: “The fact that the NTSB is here indicates we’re very concerned about this. I’ve been on the board for 12 years and this is one of the biggest losses of life we have seen in a very long time.”

The crash is the worst in the Albany-area Capital Region since the 2005 sinking of a tour boat on Lake George, which killed 20 people, many of whom were vacationers from Michigan.

Family members of some of the victims have told the press that the limo passengers were traveling to a birthday party and came from multiple families. While the names of the victims have not been officially released as of this writing, some information has become public through relatives’ statements and GoFundMe pages.

Among the deceased are two newlywed couples: Erin Vertucci and Shane McGowan, as well as Axel and Amy Steenburg. Vertucci worked at St. Mary’s Healthcare in Amsterdam, New York, as an administrative assistant. Employees of a local semiconductor manufacturing company, GlobalFoundries, were also among those killed.

Saturday’s crash happened just before 2 p.m., when the limo driver failed to stop at an intersection at the bottom of a hill, continued into the parking lot of Apple Barrel Country Store, hitting two people and an unoccupied SUV, then collided with an earthen

embankment. All 18 people in the limo, as well as the two struck in the parking lot, were killed.

As deadly as the crash was, it could have been even worse. Apple Barrel Country Store is a popular tourist destination during the fall, when tourists travel to upstate New York to see the foliage change colors. Jessica Kirby, the store manager, told the *New York Times* that the store was packed for Columbus Day weekend, which is usually its busiest. Most of her customers had arrived from New York City, the state capital Albany or New Jersey, she told the *Times*.

The intersection, where State Route 30 and State Route 30A meet in a T, is notoriously dangerous. The two roads meet after descending “steeply downhill,” according to the *Times*. There is only a stop sign at the intersection, rather than a more visible traffic light. The speed limit leading into the intersection is 50 mph, according to a Google Maps Street View capture from August 2016.

Kirby told the *Times*, “We’ve had three tractor-trailer type vehicles—they come down that hill too fast, they go through our parking lot and they end up in a field behind our business.”

Schoharie Town Supervisor Alan Tavenner said that the state Department of Transportation worked on the intersection about seven years ago, although to no apparent effect. The Albany-based *Times-Union* quotes Tavenner saying, “There have been tractor trailers that have come barreling down that hill and it was a miracle they didn’t kill somebody.”

Tavenner told the *Times*, “I honestly think it was a more dangerous intersection than it was before.”

Accidents are so frequent that Kirby immediately recognized the sound and called 911. “We’ve heard accidents before. You know that sound when it happens.”

The tragedy underscores the dangerous state of roads in the United States. Despite the intersection's hazards being known for years, adequate measures were not taken, apparently contributing to the avoidable deaths of 20 people.

It also underscores the semi-regulated nature of stretch limos. After a 2015 limo accident on Long Island that killed four people, a grand jury found serious safety issues with limos with aftermarket modifications.

Aftermarket limousines are not subject to the same safety regulations as factory-made limos. According to the Associated Press, "A grand jury found that vehicles converted into stretch limousines often don't have safety measures including side-impact air bags, reinforced rollover protection bars and accessible emergency exits."

The main outcome of the 2015 crash was that the NTSB would investigate limousine crashes on a case-by-case basis.

It is not clear as of this writing if the 2001 Ford Excursion in the crash had aftermarket modifications, although it did have 17 passengers in addition to the driver.



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